

Fact Versus Fiction. Researching Ethnic Groups in Australia

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Introduction

While there is a general perception regarding research of a purely scientific nature (as in the fields of medicine, chemistry, nuclear physics, etc.), in that it is understood to involve the collection of data through experimentation, observation and other strictly controlled means, the demands of other types of scholarly research are not so widely comprehended. Indeed, they are often confused with the investigative type of research frequently carried out by journalists, novelists and others, with the general misapprehension that research in the humanities consists simply of the gathering of information and then the writing of an article or book. This popular idea is erroneous, however. To the uninitiated, scholarly research may look simple in theory, but in practice it is a demanding and complex enterprise which is not undertaken lightly, and incorporates a multitude of concerns and difficulties.¹

Leaving aside the pivotal question of funding and budgetary requirements on which the fate of many proposed research projects depends, some of the main concerns and difficulties in carrying out the research are:

- a) the stipulation of the goals of the research, ensuring that they are neither too broad nor too narrow, and that they are not imprecise,
- b) the translation of the goals into measurable parameters of achievement,
- c) the ascertainment of all possible sources of information,
- d) the selection of the relevant method to apply according to the object of the particular research project, and
- e) the use of the appropriate techniques and the evaluation of their validity.

¹ My comments and examples are based on my research carried out in Australia over the past twenty years on Greek immigrant literature, the Greek and other ethnic presses, and the social history of the Greeks in Australia.

In fact, a small pilot study is often carried out to test the appropriateness and validity of all these points, adjusting them as necessary according to the results of this preliminary study.

Research involving ethnic groups

Research into any aspects of ethnic groups in Australia of course entails all the concerns and difficulties inherent in any scholarly research. There are a number of these, however, which, though they may appear in other areas of scholarly research, are particularly prominent in research involving ethnic groups.

My research during all these years in Australia has verified this, and I have been confronted with many such problems, of which some have been particularly frequent, and others especially perplexing.

One of the most ubiquitous and most sensitive of such problems is the mythology which, with the passing of time, develops in an ethnic group regarding individuals, organisations, etc., and the demand placed on the researcher to carefully and tactfully demythologise people's lives and achievements in order to ensure that the end result is one which accurately reflects the true facts and conditions.

The attributes and achievements of much-loved or prominent people in an ethnic community have a tendency to become exaggerated over the years, with the exaggerations ultimately being considered by all as facts rather than fiction – and it is the fiction rather than the facts that the people want to continue believing, whatever factual proofs the researcher may have. To this end, there is a tendency for families, or sometimes communities, to try to interfere with the information which will eventually be published, seeking to have the old mythologies perpetuated, or only the "positive" achievements of a relative or friend published and not the possibly less impressive aspects of their life.

Another problem frequently confronted is that of lack of material. Moreover, of the scanty material which does exist, much of it is in the hands of individuals and, therefore, may be scattered all over the country. This is compounded by the fact that few ethnic groups have organised archives which allow public access, although fortunately this is not true of all ethnic groups. Of communities which do hold archives, examples of particularly impressive ones are those held by the Jewish community with its Holocaust Museums and the Archive of Australian Judaica which is located in the Fisher Library of the University of Sydney, as well as those held by the Greek community. This community has the National Centre for Hellenic Studies and Research at La Trobe University, and the Greek-Australian Archives, Museum and Learning Centre at RMIT University.

Similarly there are relatively few bibliographies available on issues relating to ethnic groups, although here mention must be made of CHOMI-DAS, the

abstracts publication which was regularly produced by the Clearing House on Migration Issues in Melbourne from 1972 to 1992.²

On the other hand much material in private hands has been lost through a myriad of causes, for example the value of old minutes, correspondence, diaries, literary pieces, old newspapers and magazines, etc. was never recognised and so they have been destroyed, either by the original owners or their descendants; material has been lost or thrown out when people changed their residence; other material has perished through accident such as fire or flood, while some has been bequeathed to individuals or institutions overseas. Of the material which does remain, much of it has been damaged through accident or carelessness, or has badly deteriorated through poor storage.

Similarly, those turning to old editions of newspapers and magazines for their information find that the owners of many of these publications, especially early ones, did not keep copies of each, or even of any, of the issues. Moreover, the ethnic press collections in the National and State Libraries are quite poor, with some of the material they hold being in such a fragile condition that access to it is denied to everyone, including researchers.

Furthermore, published material, especially of earlier times but even of material published today, often contains inaccuracies and misinformation due to carelessness, incomplete research or faulty information given to the researcher, and these mistakes are often perpetuated.³

This problem places an extra burden on the researcher working with ethnic groups since it is not sufficient just to cross check material, rather information needs to be checked against several sources and wherever possible against official documents (birth, marriage and death certificates, shipping lists, etc.).

² Although the Clearing House on Migration Issues recently closed down, its library, including copies of all issues of *CHOMI-DAS*, will be housed from October 1998 in the Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, and in this way will continue to be accessible to researchers and others.

³ An example of an older perpetuated mistake is that found in the book *The Foreign-language Press in Australia 1848-1964* by M. Gilson and J. Zubrzycki (1967: 19) where the title of the first Greek-language newspaper in Australia is given as *Afstralis* instead of *Afstralia*, and despite my proving in my book *Greek Voices in Australia: a tradition of prose, poetry and drama* (1987: 15-17), with photographs of the publications, that its title was *Afstralia*, and *Afstralis* was a periodical which appeared later, the title of the newspaper is still given wrongly by some writers. In the same way, an example of an error in a recent publication is that in *Australians and Greeks: volume II the middle years* by H. Gilchrist (1997: 339), where it is written of Efstratios Venlis, the founder of *Afstralia*, that he "died unmarried". However, Venlis definitely was married, and he and his wife Margaret had six children! This information is documented, with photographs, in my latest book *In the Wake of Odysseus: portraits of Greek settlers in Australia* (1997: 65-83).

Mistakes and faulty information bring us to the problem of language. When undertaking a research project involving one or more ethnic groups who speak a language other than one known by the researcher, the ultimate solution is, of course, to have at his or her disposal an interpreter and a translator who speak the relevant language or languages. Unfortunately it goes without saying that this is a costly solution, and one for which funding is not often readily available, so other approaches to this problem, and even to the research, have to be found.

Leaving this aside, the biggest pitfall relating to the language problem is in relying too heavily on material (published or unpublished) gathered about an ethnic group or one of its members by a researcher who does not speak the relevant language. This is material which needs to be used with caution. Unavoidably such researchers cannot use primary sources but must rely on secondary (and possibly inaccurate) published sources as well as on the memories, ideas, opinions etc. of people from that ethnic group. Not only is memory a notoriously inaccurate source of information but the researchers working with an ethnic group other than their own are confronted, knowingly or unknowingly, with the problem of ethnic pride.

The members of an ethnic group are often not going to admit to failures or weaknesses to an "outsider", and the already existing tendency to magnify achievements is increased. Moreover, there is the strong possibility that the nature of the information which is given will be biased in favour of the ethnic group, that is, what they would like to be known and believed rather than the true facts if these are less palatable. This is done, of course, to shield their group from criticism and at the same time to increase its prestige in this multicultural country where any ethnic group is only one of many, all of them competing for status and prestige in the wider Australian community.

While, as has been pointed out, this means that material gathered in this way can be misleading, the person who undertakes research of this nature needs to be aware of the dangers involved. Not only is sensitivity to this problem essential, it is vital that all the information gathered is filtered through a screen of facts and official documents.

Working with another language involves many other concerns, not least that of translation. Even when a translator with a good knowledge of both languages is used, the final text needs to be checked with care to avoid language interference mistakes which lead to grammatically and semantically distorted sentence structures. One of many such deviations is the case of a sentence in the proposed English translation of Alekos Doucas' autobiographical work *To Struggle - To Youth* (1953) as "lying on the next stretcher with a shattered leg" instead of "lying with a shattered leg on the next stretcher".

The language problem is vast and has many aspects perplexing the researcher, even with seemingly minor problems like that of the reading and transliteration of names, titles etc. written in another script such as Arabic, Chinese or Cyrillic.

The validity of research involving ethnic groups, however, is threatened not just by the technical factors of language and lack of material, but also by the human factor itself.

In any society there exist contending groups and rivalries. In an ethnic community, which exists as a smaller group within an overarching mainstream society and may therefore tend to develop a "ghetto" mentality, such rivalries may be heightened. Competitiveness or antagonisms between localities or regions in the homeland are often carried into the ethnic community. On the other hand rivalry can exist, for example, among families which are contending for positions of status or power within the group. This can lead to achievements being claimed solely by members of one faction or family, marginalising or even excluding the contribution made by people outside their group.

In conjunction with this group aspect of the human factor, there is also the personal one. Personal factors which invalidate research include poor memory span, where facts and information are forgotten, confused or incorrectly recalled. As a result of this, not only is wrong information given but, for example, the same interviewee can give on two different occasions two different sets of facts about a person or event, each time just as adamantly!

On the other hand people may view the researcher with distrust, suspicion or even hostility, fearing that the researcher might expose family affairs to the public gaze. Suspicion may also be based on fear, especially in more recently-arrived ethnic groups or those where there is a totalitarian regime in the homeland, people within the group fearing that anyone asking questions or gathering information about them may have an ulterior motive, or possibly even be connected with homeland authorities.

While this problem can usually be eased or solved through gaining the support of prominent people or leaders within that group, sometimes less easy to convince are the people who think that the researcher might benefit financially from the information and material they are supplying, suddenly feeling that the material they had long neglected must be valuable since someone is interested in it!

Conversely, people may see no value in the material they hold or even in the research itself, and so be unwilling to give their time and co-operation. Often descendants have a genuine lack of knowledge about their forebears (parents or grandparents), or members of a family may disagree among themselves on details of people and events. It has been the case in my own research that on more than one occasion I have had considerably more information about a person than his or her children had.

The emotional loyalty of relatives and descendants can lead to exaggeration or sanitisation of the facts, while personal jealousy can result in distortion of the truth.

Finally, although the above problems on the whole concern research carried out within Australia, it must be borne in mind that the possibility is inherent in any research involving ethnic groups that the needs of the research may extend beyond the boundaries of this country. The main reasons for this are the fact that the informants may have returned to their homeland, people who have died here may have bequeathed their material to relatives or institutions in their homeland, or their spouse may have returned there on the partner's death. An additional reason why the research may have to extend overseas is that it is sometimes necessary to examine official documents such as birth and marriage certificates which are held by authorities in the homeland.

Conclusion

Research involving ethnic groups has special problems, difficulties and concerns which are additional to those encountered normally in any other kind of research. In separating fact from fiction and truth from opinion, and in presenting a complete and accurate picture, the researcher in this area needs to be aware of the potential difficulties and for that reason to be particularly thorough, sceptical and critical of the sources, especially the emotional and dubious ones. But in undertaking such a task, the researcher is making a vital contribution not only to scholarship but also to the wider society.

Not enough is known about the past or even the present of many of our ethnic groups, despite the fact that they are an integral and valuable part of Australian society, and for the researcher who delves into this particular area with all its idiosyncratic problems and frustrations, in the final analysis the outcome is exceptionally rewarding.

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